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## Renewing the Christian Contemplative Dimension of Spirituality Through an Ancient Tradition Known Today as Centering Prayer

Joan Marie Young Bretthauer

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1994

**Renewing the Christian Contemplative  
Dimension of Spirituality Through  
an Ancient Tradition Known Today  
as Centering Prayer**



Joan Marie Young Bretthauer, B.S.

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate  
School of Lindenwood College in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Science

**Preparing for Transformation:  
An Analysis of Renewing the Christian Contemplative  
Dimension of Spirituality Through an Ancient Tradition  
Known Today as Centering Prayer**

**1. ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper and documentary video is to present one particular aspect of the Christian contemplative tradition known today as centering prayer.

The topic is addressed by a brief review of ancient contemplation and meditative life styles as practiced by some of the major religions of the world. The focus is then narrowed to view the topic from the Roman Catholic perspective.

In the early Christian church (Roman Catholic) contemplation was the common goal of lay and religious life. This approach fell into disuse around the time of the Reformation, but has undergone a renewal in the last generation for many different reasons. The documentary video achieves this by a combination of nature and religious footage combined with excerpts of interviews with people who practice the contemplative life. Instructions on the method of centering prayer is explained in the documentary.

**Renewing the Christian Contemplative  
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as Centering Prayer**

Joan Marie Young Bretthauer, B.S.

A Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate  
School of Lindenwood College in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Science

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY:

Professor Michael Castro  
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**Preparing for Transformation:  
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Known Today as Centering Prayer**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 How I Got Involved**

A few years ago a friend of the family invited me to attend a workshop on Centering Prayer that was conducted by the St. Louis Contemplative Outreach Organization. Although I was introduced to prayer as a child, "centering prayer" was an unfamiliar concept. I asked her to compare it to "normal" prayer and was told she found it to be more beneficial in helping her put her life into perspective. I became acquainted with this particular friend about seventeen years ago. Through most of that period, she tended to be a restless, aggressive, demanding, and excitable person. However, over the past five years she has changed dramatically and she credits this to her involvement with the Contemplative Outreach Organization and her daily practice of centering prayer.

Because of the remarkable change in her demeanor, I decided to attend a workshop on Centering Prayer conducted by Contemplative Outreach. Although the subject was, indeed, prayer, it was not the

traditional type of prayer that I was taught in Catholic school. The information disseminated by the priest teaching the class was overwhelming, both in volume and in content. I found the topic to be interesting but at the same time confusing. I learned that centering prayer as practiced in the Christian tradition is a form of passive meditation.

### 1.2 Element Of Project-Video

Since I was born and reared Catholic I knew that centering prayer was not widely known to lay people in the Church and my exposure to, and practice of, centering prayer has led me to believe there is a need for more people to be introduced to this practice. I realized a properly edited video could effectively inform people about the history, usage, and technique of centering prayer and could possibly motivate them to try it. Therefore I decided I could serve the dual purpose of educating people about this topic and completing my Masters degree by producing a video documentary on this subject.

### 1.3 Discussion of Video Documentary

I met with the St. Louis Contemplative Outreach Coordinator and his staff to discussed the potential benefits of using a visual medium such as video to inform parishes about Contemplative Outreach's work in centering prayer. The Coordinator was responsive and interested in the idea. I told

him his full support and backing was necessary for this project to be completed successfully. I also advised him that interviews with both experts and ordinary practitioners on this subject would be required. He agreed to help secure interviews and indicated that, while he did not foresee problems obtaining them, he could not guarantee them.

With these preliminaries completed, work on the project began. However, a month after interviewing several people from the Contemplative Outreach Organization, I received a call from the St. Louis Coordinator stating the National Office of Contemplative Outreach reviewed their policy and they would not grant permission for me to proceed with this documentary. They felt any video involving Contemplative Outreach should be done under the direct supervision of the National Director, who resides in New Jersey.

#### 1.4 Off To A New Start

I learned of other people who practiced a contemplative lifestyle both in the Catholic Church and in other religions. Fortified with this information, I was compelled to proceed with this documentary.

Interviews were obtained with the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. They provided additional leads and the list of interviewees increased rapidly as the documentary expanded to include the fact that

contemplative life is alive in other traditions; Judaism, Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Hinduism, and Buddhism, as well as Catholicism. Ultimately, twenty five people were interviewed as part of the research for this documentary.

### 1.5 Christian Contemplative Tradition

The Christian contemplative dimension is an ancient tradition dating back to the early day of Christianity. This nondiscursive contemplative prayer was practiced widely until the Reformation, and was the acknowledged goal for clergy and laity alike. Following the upheaval of the Reformation, this heritage was virtually lost.

John Hughes states that after the Reformation, the practice was available to only a handful of monks and nuns in a few enclosed, contemplative communities. He added that numerous Catholic books on prayer (many still on the shelves) warned that this ancient prayer form was not for ordinary Christians, but only for a small number of advanced souls (Centering Prayer 7).

Thomas Keating notes that the post-Reformation teaching opposed to contemplation was the direct opposite of earlier tradition. That tradition, taught uninterruptedly for the first fifteenth centuries, held that

contemplation is the normal evaluation of genuine spiritual life and hence is open to all Christians (26).

After the Reformation many Catholics believed it was more important to emphasize doctrinal issues than to live a spiritual life. The Western model of God that developed in the post-Reformation period was that of a god completely separate from us. In this world view we are supposed to spend our lives on earth gaining merits for the future life.

Scripture says the divine Spirit within us inspires all good thoughts and deeds and we must listen and cooperate. The gospel teaches us to love God and our neighbors in a practical way here and now and to entrust the future to God's mercy.

Although the contemplative approach to Scripture isn't new, it was virtually lost for several centuries. It contained the richness and wisdom of earlier times, such as the stages of the Spiritual journey, how contemplative prayer is meant to influence daily life, and the belief that daily life is the arena where transformation takes place. All of these great insights of the early and medieval Christian thinkers were put on the back burner.

As Fr. Keating explains, people were left with a spirituality that was heavily diluted by Cartesian philosophical considerations and the Newtonian world view. It is only with Einstein's theory of relativity,

quantum mechanics, and the new physics that people have moved away from this excessively dualistic and rationalistic world view and have begun to accept the interrelatedness of everything that exists, which is, of course, what the great saints have been saying all along ("Contemplative Prayer").

Recently there has been an upsurge of interest in recovering the Contemplative tradition that has been brought about for many different reasons. Historical and theological studies have rediscovered the integral teachings of St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila and other masters of the spiritual life. This interest of mysticism parallels the rapid change in society.

Post World War II challenge from the East is another reason. Methods of meditation similar to contemplative prayer in the Christian tradition have proliferated, produced good results, and received much publicity. Fr. Keating says Eastern religions have challenged us by inviting us to look into our magnificent contemplative heritage, dust off that forgotten treasure, and make it available in our time.

Many Catholics went to the East because they did not find a deep and nourishing spirituality on the parish level or in Catholic schools. It's little wonder that these outstanding (Eastern) teachers attracted great numbers of our young people. Keating remembers visiting several Eastern

communities and found that over half of the people there were Catholics (Open Heart, Open Mind 26).

Other reasons for the renewal is the uncertainty of our times and enormous problems of daily living. People are searching for ways to bring quiet into their lives. Some people say prayer doesn't work and they feel God has abandoned them, and this causes their value system to distort. Yet for many, prayer simply means "saying prayers" by memory or out of a book. All too few have learned to pray in a deep and life-changing manner.

In 1971 a group of Trappist monks met with Pope Paul VI in Rome. The Pope told the Trappists and others that the Catholic Church will never revive until it recovers its contemplative tradition, and he asked them to help the church reintroduce this spiritual dimension (qtd. in Goleman). Since then, Trappists, Fathers M. Basil Pennington, William Menninger, and Thomas Keating have introduced hundreds of thousands of people to centering prayer through retreats, talks, books and tapes.

#### 1.6 Contemplative Prayer

Fr. Thomas Keating is a Cistercian monk and founder of the Centering Prayer Movement. Keating says modern Christians are hungry for the depth that contemplative prayer provides. He defines this prayer as an ancient method based on the conviction that God resides within us and

not somewhere in the distant cosmos. In contemplative prayer we open our minds and hearts to God's presence within us. We accept God's invitation to develop a friendship that will eventually lead to divine union, the full awareness of God's presence in us, in all humanity, and in all human experiences.

Contemplative prayer is the process by which we start to hang out with God regularly, so to speak. We begin to wait on God as one would a friend, and we become more and more familiar with God and ourselves. In contemplative prayer we develop a loving knowledge of God beyond thoughts, feelings, and concepts. This loving knowledge of God's presence within us leads us to establish good habits and makes us sensitive to the inspirations of the Spirit and aware of our own and humanity's basic goodness. Eventually, contemplative prayer leads to the recognition that one is in an abiding state of union with God and that one is being transformed ("Contemplative Prayer").

### 1.7 Centering Prayer

The name centering prayer is new, but the method itself is the Church's oldest classical form of private prayer. This prayer derived its name from Thomas Merton, who was one of the great spiritual masters of the West in our century.



Centering prayer has gone by other names in earlier times: prayer of simplicity, prayer of the heart, prayer of simple regard. All these takeoff points are designed to access the spiritual level of our being and the divine Presence dwelling in our inmost center. Centering prayer is simply a stepping stone toward reducing the obstacles to the gifts of the Spirit that lead to contemplation.

Unlike discursive meditation which is active, centering prayer is passive. Instead of teaching us to concentrate our thoughts, images, emotions, and wills on the selected meditation material, centering prayer encourages us to wait in silence upon God.

There are four basic steps to centering prayer:

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within.
2. Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
3. When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.

4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a few minutes.

M. Basil Pennington states, "centering prayer, coming out of the tradition, is a way today of freeing us, uniting us, and giving us room to live and breathe the very life of Christ" (59).

The video documentary focuses on "Renewing the Christian Contemplative Dimension of Spirituality through an Ancient Tradition known as Centering Prayer." The intention is to inspire people to explore this heartfelt dimension. People are attached to their desires and they don't move past them. They need to grow beyond themselves into the ultimate spirit. Self-realization and our method of reflection upon our relationship with God is very important.

There is a vast amount of information available for instruction about the contemplative dimension of life. This is a topic that is both fascinating and yet highly complex because the lessons are found, not in descriptions or conceptual knowledge, but in the experience of living in the moment. Since I began my experience with centering prayer, I have observed that contemplative prayer and meditation has become a topic for several articles in secular publications such as health and women's magazines and newspapers.

## 1.8 Divine Therapy

Any form of meditation or prayer that transcends thinking sets off the dynamic of interior purification. By practicing centering prayer, deep rooted tension in the form of thoughts will be released. These thoughts that result from this therapy arise without the participant knowing where they come from or why. A person may feel intense anger, sorrow or fear without any relation to the recent past. While centering the best way to handle these thoughts is to return to the sacred word.

Fr. Keating believes through contemplation, one encounters Jesus not only as a friend but as the divine psychotherapist. Keating is a firm believer in the psychological benefits of centering prayer. This prayer puts the body and psyche in deep rest. The body rests so much that the defense mechanisms of a lifetime begin to relax (Windsor 15).

Through this process, the undigested psychological material of a lifetime is gradually evacuated. These thoughts, moods, or feelings of depression might last for several days. When these thoughts pass the participant's psychological insides will feel better. This is when the false self gives away to the true self.

Once the participant grasps the fact that these thoughts are not only inevitable, but an integral part of the process of healing and growth, and

that they are initiated by God, they are able to take a positive view of this process. Instead of looking upon them as painful distractions, the person sees them in a broader perspective which includes both interior silence and thoughts - thoughts that a person may not want, but ones that are valuable for the purpose of purification and moments of profound tranquillity.

Each step of the purification process, Fr. Keating compares to St. John of the Cross's dark night of the soul. There is a corresponding sense of freedom that this kind of psychological healing is part of the salvation God has in mind for all. Meditation promotes health of mind, body and soul and freedom from the compulsions that arise from seeking happiness in the wrong places (Windsor 15).

### 1.9 Relaxation Response

Today in our Western Culture a growing group of physicians have started to recommend specially adapted instruction in meditation to their patients that supplement their standard medical care. For many years Dr. Herbert Benson taught second year medical students learning cardiology how to induce in themselves and their patients the "Relaxation Response". This is Benson's name for the physiological recuperation generic to all meditation techniques.

Benson has also taught incoming medical students the method to help control their own stress. Close to 1,000 other medical professionals have taken his post graduate training courses on using meditation with their own patients. Over the years, The Mind/ Body Medical Institute and division of behavioral medicine, both of which Dr. Benson directs, has enrolled more than 10,000 patients in an 8-10 week training program in the method. Spinoff programs have started at hospitals and clinics in several states (Goleman 43).

The Relaxation Response is a simple meditative technique that helps the participant relieve inner tension, deal more effectively with stress, lower blood pressure, and improve physical and emotional health. After reviewing Eastern and Western religious, cultic, and lay practices, the method was developed. From those age-old techniques four basic steps have been brought forth to incorporate what is now known as "Relaxation Response". The four basic steps are:

1. A Quiet Environment: choose a quiet environment with few distractions. This environment contributes to the effectiveness of the repeated word or phrase by making it easier to eliminate distracting thoughts.
2. A Mental Device: this shifts the mind from logical, externally

oriented thought. There should be a constant stimulus such as a sound, word, or phrase that is repeated silently or aloud, or fixed gazing at an object. The eyes are usually closed if you are using a repeated word or sound; of course your eyes are open if you are gazing. Attention to the normal rhythm of breathing is also useful and enhances the repetition of the sound or the word.

3. A Passive Attitude: when distracting thoughts occur, they are to be disregarded and attention redirected to the repetition of gazing; you should not worry about how well you are performing the technique, because this may well prevent the Relaxation Response from occurring. Adopt a let it happen attitude. The passive attitude is perhaps the most important element in eliciting the Relaxation Response. Distracting thought will occur, don't worry about them. When the thoughts occur and you become aware of them, simply return to the repetition of the mental device of the sound, word, phrase, or gazing that you have chosen.
4. A Comfortable Position: posture is important so that there is no undue muscular tension. You should be comfortable and relaxed.

The benefits and obstacles of the Relaxation Response are similar to those of Centering Prayer. Many of the interviewees from the video have

indicated that they have benefited in ways similar to those practicing the Relaxation Response, such as experiencing calmness, suppression of fears, an open and more receptive personality, just to name a few. The obstacles encountered in the Relaxation Response are the same as in other forms of meditation such as finding time to indulge in the practice, wandering of the mind, and reoccurring thoughts. If the response method is used for medical treatment, it should be done with the approval and supervision of the participant's physician.

Dr. Benson believes the Relaxation Response is a natural gift that anyone can turn on and use. By bridging the traditional gaps between psychology, physiology, medicine, and history, it has been established that this method is an innate mechanism within us. It is a universal human capacity, and even though it has been evoked in the religions of both East and West for most of recorded history, you don't have to engage in any rites or esoteric practices to bring it forth (123).

Today people face many obstacles in daily life and one of the ways of dealing with these obstacles is to find something that will help move the person into a process of growth and inner freedom. They need to deal with it therapeutically and to be able to apply it in an easy and simple way that will work.

## **2. LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Experience God**

In the Christian tradition of meditation, the intent of being with God is everything. According to Swami Chetanananda, in Vedanta tradition meditation is twofold. The primary purpose is God realization. Secondly it gives peace and joy. In the Buddhist tradition, Phra Choa Netprom indicated in his interview that spirituality is not a goal but, ultimately spiritual growth is achieved, even if that was not the original intention.

One of the many points brought up by the Catholic interviewees and Rabbi Goodman is that people today are not satisfied with simply knowing about God; they yearn to experience God. One of the reasons that many Catholics are seeking the rich spiritual heritage of contemplative prayer is that it has a deep and life changing effect. The people who participate in contemplative prayer/ meditation will, over a period of time, become fuller, human beings as a result of their participation. They will experience the fruits of peace, joy, and happiness in their lives. They will also enhance their ability to relate and cope with the world.



## 2.2 Crises

All of the interviewees agreed that one of the many benefits of prayer/meditation is its value to a person in crisis. It keeps the person from being unnecessarily disturbed about those aspects of the crisis that are beyond his or her control. It can assist a person to sharpen his thinking and help him make the best response to his crisis.

People will experience a number of crises in their lives, such as loss of a loved one, breaking up of a relationship, or loss of a job, just to name a few. A person in crisis needs stillness and inner peace. These techniques will lead him/her into the necessary stillness.

One of the great consolations of contemplative prayer is simply being able to be quiet with God and rest in his presence, detached from oneself and from the crisis. When a person reenters the crisis, he reenters with a better perspective and a more loving attitude. Every crisis, whether individual or institutional, is an opportunity for growth.

## 2.3 Obstacles to Practicing Contemplative Prayer or Meditation

All interviewees agree that people who participate in contemplative prayer/meditation are likely to encounter many obstacles (problems). These obstacles range from very basic issues to those as esoteric as emptying the unconscious. Some practical obstacles are laziness, or the

inability to find the time to practice these methods.

Some participants may experience what is referred to as "dry times." This is defined as time spent in the practice that seem to be unproductive, i.e., nothing seems to be happening. People may grow tired of this and give up, but they should be encouraged to persevere. Participants should not evaluate or grade their results. Gradually the participant will know the method is working because, inevitably, he will find that he has become more loving, compassionate, and peaceful. It is perhaps more important that a person work diligently at the practice than it is to evaluate it.

After practicing these techniques a person may start accessing the psyche. The unconscious will open and unload a variety of experiences from the individual's past. These repressed energies will surface and will have to be dealt with at the appropriate time.

Even people who don't get involved with the life of the spirit or life of prayer will be required to deal with these energies too. Some will try to deal with them through their addictions, or they may project them into relationships and act them out. They will be dealing with these energies indirectly and these energies will be running their lives. People who practice prayer/ meditation will be dealing with these energies directly and are more likely to learn how to accept the energies and how to allow them

to pass on.

Contemplative prayer/ meditation is a method to handle crises and it enables a person to find the inner strength to face his problems rather than to run from them. It will not eliminate a person's problem; it helps them handle the problem with less difficulty. It leads naturally to the transformation of a person's whole personality. Its purpose is not limited to moral improvement. It brings about a change in the way of perceiving and responding to reality.

#### 2.4 Mentors

In all traditions it is highly recommended for the participant to have a spiritual director, teacher, guru, mentor or support group.

#### 2.5 Support Groups

Another point discussed by several interviewees was the benefit of a weekly support group. Sharing experiences in a small group has proven to be very supportive, and is a valuable means of continuing education. The knowledge that the support group assembles each week provides encouragement to keep going, and is an open invitation to return to the practice. By sharing the experience with others, a person's own discernment of the ups and downs of the practice is sharpened. The group serves as a source of encouragement and can normally solve problems that might arise

regarding the method. The purpose of the meeting is spiritual refreshment and mutual encouragement in the practice.

## 2.6 Books and Articles

Open Heart, Open Mind by Fr. Thomas Keating is a question and answer book for people who are beginning to enter into the Christian contemplative process. It is a great book for beginners, but is not limited to just beginners. It provides answers for the most frequently asked questions and herein lies one of its most significant values. When a person travels the spiritual journey, he will encounter different stages and levels. The book leads you through the patterns of spiritual development so you can see your own growth with understanding and acceptance. It also covers how to handle obstacles that will arise while participating in contemplative prayer.

Centering Prayer by M. Basil Pennington is a book that dedicates several chapters to this Ancient Christian heritage, the Desert Fathers, and their teachings of this rich tradition of the contemplative dimension of the Gospel. Pennington has developed a new approach to these ancient Christian prayer forms. His "centering prayer" combines the best of the Eastern Christian spiritual exercises (such as the Jesus Prayer) with a spirituality for today's world. He offers simple suggestions for overcoming problems that discourage people from praying well. He explains how to

relax for prayer, how to listen, and how to handle pain. This is a practical book offering a source of inspiration that shows through a blend of East and West, our common love of God, and belief in Jesus Christ.

Jewish Meditation by Aryeh Kaplan is a very interesting book on Jewish meditation. Jewish and Christian traditions of meditation have many parallels. There are Jews who are actively seeking spiritual meaning in life, often on a mystical level. Some American Jews are becoming involved with Eastern religions and following disciplines of transcendental meditation. He also notes there are Jews who are exploring other religions instead of their own because they know of nothing deep or spiritually satisfying in Judaism. Most Jews and Christians are not aware that some form of meditation is part of their tradition.

Kaplan explains in his book how important texts on Jewish mediation have never been published, even in their original Hebrew and that the most important works exist only in manuscript, locked away in libraries and museums. To research this book (as well as subsequent work) Kaplan had to first locate the manuscripts and then research through scholarly journals and library catalogues. Once he found the manuscripts, copies had to be made. Some scripts were located in places like the Lenin library in Moscow. Kaplan states this research was not an easy task. Many of the

manuscripts were hundreds of years old, written in obsolete scripts that could be deciphered only with considerable effort. Kaplan feels the effort was worthwhile because many important keys to Jewish meditation were discovered.

One of the differences between Jewish and Christian meditation deals with contemplation. In the Christian tradition, only through the grace of God can contemplation be achieved. Kaplan mentioned that, in the Jewish tradition, a visually oriented participant may find it easier to fill his mind with visual contemplation.

In Jewish meditation the participant can also learn to meditate on sounds, objects, and words, just to name a few options, but in the Christian tradition you are taught to meditate on silence. Kaplan and Fr. Thomas Keating both agree that meditation can be used as a form of therapy.

One of the most important points of How to Meditate by Lawrence LeShan was his discussion of the real goal of meditation. People meditate to become fuller human beings. They meditate in order to gain serenity, peace, joy, greater efficiency in everyday life, to increase their power to love, and to achieve a deeper view of reality.

These beginning goals are good and realistic for this discipline. The real goal however, is to become more complete, to more fully live the

potential of being human. He says all of us at one level or another know how little we have fulfilled ourselves, and how much of our potential has been left untrained and underdeveloped.

LeShan and several of the interviewees, have commented that we need to realize the existence of another part of our being, the part pertaining to our potential for existence and relationships. This is the part that needs to be developed in order for us to achieve our fullest humanness and our oneness with God and the universe.

Chogyam Trungpa, in Meditation In Action, details Buddha's experience roughly 2,500 years ago and compares it with today. The story format of this book contributed to its capability to hold ones interest. The author states that a person must never commit or conform to any religious or political structure prior to discovering the "real essence" of the participant's goals. I believe this means to look inside oneself and learn about intelligence, wisdom and the inward self. This can be accomplished through meditation.

Buddhism is not based on the revelation of God, or on faith and devotion to God, or gods of any kind. The Buddhist have many qualities. They learn truth through meditation, they do not believe in "I" as in ego, they are nonmaterialistic and are very disciplined.

Buddhist meditation is based on devotion. It is basically an inward, introverted practice, well elaborated on in the Buddhist teachings, into the depth of the heart and the mind. This is similar to Christian prayer of the heart. The end results of Buddhist meditation are the same as Christian and Judaism. The fruits of meditation are many. Some of them are an awakened state of mind, a positive outlook on life, an intuitive mind, and patience.

Dr. Herbert Benson's book, The Relaxation Response, describes another form of meditation. In 1968 practitioners of Transcendental Meditation (TM) went to the Harvard Medicine School laboratory, where Dr. Benson was studying the relationship between a monkey's behavior and his blood pressure. The devotees of meditation requested to be studied, because they felt they could lower their blood pressure through TM. They were turned away because Benson thought "why investigate anything so far out as meditation." However, the practitioners of TM persisted and the initial refusal turned into a yes.

Through the combination of this medical research and the lasting humanistic wisdom of the great religions, the method of The Relaxation Response was developed. Dr. Benson investigated and tested several hypotheses and was able to determine that this method was effective in



lowering hypertension and preventing of stress-related diseases. It also decreased drug, alcohol and cigarette usage, and improved physical and emotional health of the practitioners.

## 2.7 Hagia Sophia

Several verses from the poem, "Hagia Sophia" by Thomas Merton were included in the introduction of the video to create a contemplative tone. This is a biblical and spiritual poem. The name Sophia is Greek and means wisdom. The wisdom that people carry within them is the subject of this poem. It can only be experienced by the person who doesn't rely on his own wisdom or his own strength, but rather by one who experiences himself as broken, humble or dependent. At this time of new despair, the person is experiencing Hagia Sophia, which offers the resources and potential for renewal.

"An Interview with Father Thomas Keating" by Audrey Vest is a question and answer article that touches on the basic questions of *contemplative prayer*. *Father Keating explains the difference between contemplative and centering prayer and also shares his views about the reasons for the current interest in it.*

"Contemplative Prayer: taking time to hang out with God" is an interesting and informative article detailing an interview with Fr. Thomas

Keating. He discusses scripture and Bible passages along with their relationship to contemplation. He describes the guidelines of Centering Prayer including the four basic steps and the frequency of participating in this discipline.

The relationship of contemplative prayer and social action is also discussed and Fr. Keating further explains that the divine energy that comes with contemplative prayer is the most powerful energy there is. He asserts that it is required to sustain service to the poor and oppressed and to find solutions to the world problems that desperately need attention.

Daniel Goleman's article, "A Slow, Methodical Calming of the Mind" talks about meditation moving to the inner cities, hospitals, and psychic spas. Shifting social currents are moving the mainstream of meditation as much towards psychological and medical relief as to its traditional terrain, spiritual quests.

This article also focuses on Reverend Basil Pennington, who is known as a modern emissary of the practice of centering prayer.

The Bulletin of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue written by Father James O'Connor covers current and past events regarding Interreligious dialogue. This particular bulletin published articles on Christian Contemplative Tradition and A Monastic Contribution to Global Healing.

Sections in the publication are dedicated for book reviews and editorials.

### **3. RESULTS - VIDEO DOCUMENTARY**

3.1 See accompanying video.

3.2 Script

#### **RENEWING THE CONTEMPLATIVE DIMENSION OF SPIRITUALITY.**

3.2.1 Introduction (poem)

##### **"Hagia Sophia"**

It was Thomas Merton who once said:

"There is in all visible things an  
invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a  
meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness.  
This mysterious Unity and Integrity is  
Wisdom, the Mother of all. There is in  
all things an inexhaustible sweetness and  
purity, a silence that is a fount of  
action and joy. It rises up in wordless  
gentleness and flows out to me from the  
unseen roots of all created being,

welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with  
indescribable humility. This is at once  
my own being, my own nature, and the Gift  
of my Creator's Thought and Art within  
me, speaking a Hagia Sophia, speaking as  
my sister, Wisdom."

### 3.2.2 Narration

1. SPIRITUAL VALUE IS A BELIEF SYSTEM THAT  
TRANSCENDS THE PHYSICAL DIMENSION OF  
A PERSON'S LIFE. (SOUND BYTES)
2. THE CONTEMPLATIVE DIMENSION IS OPEN  
TO ALL PERSONS, ALL WALKS OF LIFE. NO  
MATTER WHAT YOUR RELIGIOUS  
PERSUASION, OR YOUR WAY OF SEEKING  
TRUTH, HARMONY, AND GOODNESS, THERE  
IS AVAILABLE TO YOU THIS TIME OF QUIET,  
INNER PEACE THAT IS THE ESSENCE OF LIFE.
3. THE CONTEMPLATIVE DIMENSION OF  
SPIRITUALITY IS A TRULY MYSTICAL FORM  
OF LIVING. IT IS A PLACE IN OUR INTERIOR  
BEING THAT REFLECTS THE DIVINE. (SOUND  
BYTES)

4A. IN OUR FAST PACED, HECTIC, WORLD PEOPLE ARE TRYING TO SLOW DOWN AND FIND MEANING AND PURPOSE IN THEIR LIVES. THEY ARE SEARCHING FOR INTERIOR PEACE AND HAPPINESS. SOME EXPERTS POINT OUT THAT CONTEMPLATIVE SPIRITUALITY OFFERS MEN AND WOMEN A SIMPLE AND PRACTICAL DAILY DISCIPLINE LEADING TO PEACE AND WHOLENESS. (SOUND BYTES)

4B. DURING THE FIRST SIXTEEN CENTURIES OF ROMAN CATHOLIC HISTORY, CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER WAS THE ACKNOWLEDGED GOAL OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY FOR BOTH CLERGY AND LAITY. AFTER THE REFORMATION THIS HERITAGE, AT LEAST AS A LIVING TRADITION, WAS VIRTUALLY LOST. NOW IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY THE CHRISTIAN CONTEMPLATIVE TRADITION IS RESUMING IN MANY DIFFERENT WAYS. THE CHARISMATIC RENEWAL IS AN ADVENTURE INTO THIS DIMENSION. WE SEE THIS IN THE WORK OF A MAN LIKE JOHN MAINE WITH HIS IDEA OF CREATING A CONTEMPLATIVE

COMMUNITY IN THE HEART OF A CITY AND WITH THE WORK OF THOMAS KEATING IN REKINDLING THE PRACTICE OF CENTERING PRAYER.

5. MANY CONSIDER CONTEMPLATION TO BE THE DEEPEST FORM OF COMMUNICATION. IN CHRISTIAN TRADITION IT IS REFERRED TO AS CONTEMPLATION, IN EASTERN TRADITION IT IS CALLED MEDITATION. (SOUND BYTES)
6. CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER IS NOT AN EXTERNAL PRACTICE, RATHER IT IS A FORM OF INTERIOR PRAYER. ITS PRACTICE LEADS TO SILENCE - TO BEING STILL IN THE QUIET OF THE PSYCHE. (SOUND BYTES)
7. CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER IS ACCESSING THE DIVINE WITHIN US. (SOUND BYTES)
8. INTUITION IS NURTURED BY THE CONTACT THAT IS MADE WITH THE DIVINE WITHIN US. AS PEOPLE BEGIN TO EXPERIENCE AND REALIZE THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, THEY BEGIN TO TAKE ON THE QUALITIES AND THE ASPECTS OF THE GOD INSIDE OF THEM. (SOUND BYTES)

9. THE WORDS OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURE RECORDED IN BOTH THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS CONTINUE TO RING IN OUR HEARTS. WE READ FROM PSALM 46:10, "...BE STILL AND KNOW I AM GOD." AND AGAIN FROM JOHN 14:17, "THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH WHOM THE WORLD CANNOT ACCEPT, BECAUSE IT NEITHER SEES HIM NOR KNOWS HIM, BUT YOU KNOW HIM FOR HE LIVES WITH YOU AND WILL BE IN YOU."
10. CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER IS A JOURNEY WITH GOD. IT SUSTAINS MANY PEOPLE IN TIMES OF CRISIS. IT HAS THE POWER TO ILLUMINATE THE PATTERNS IN THEIR LIVES THAT SHOULD BE CHANGED. IT CAN IMPEL THEM TO SAY "I NEED HELP" AND TO ATTEMPT TO FIND THAT HELP. THOSE WHO PRACTICE MEDITATION ARE LED TO ACCEPT THE BAD WITH THE GOOD IN THEIR LIVES.  
(SOUND BYTES)
11. TALKED ABOUT IN QUESTION 4.
12. MANY PEOPLE EMPLOY CENTERING PRAYER AS A METHOD TO FOCUS ON THE DIVINE AND TO RECEIVE THE GIFT OF CONTEMPLATION.

CENTERING PRAYER HAS BEEN KNOWN UNDER DIFFERENT NAMES IN THE PAST, BUT THE METHOD IS A PATH TO THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT THAT LEAD TO CONTEMPLATION.

13. THE METHOD OF CENTERING PRAYER IS SIMPLE AND CONSIST OF FOUR BASIC STEPS.

A. FIRST CHOOSE A SACRED WORD, SUCH AS "JESUS" OR "TRUST" AS THE SYMBOL OF YOUR INTENTION TO CONSENT TO GOD'S PRESENCE AND ACTION WITHIN.

B. THEN SIT COMFORTABLY WITH EYES CLOSED AND SILENTLY INTRODUCE THE SACRED WORD AS THE SYMBOL OF YOUR CONSENT TO GOD'S PRESENCE AND ACTION WITHIN.

C. WHEN YOUR MIND WANDERS, RETURN EVER-SO-GENTLY TO THE SACRED WORD.

D. AT THE END OF THE PRAYER PERIOD REMAIN IN SILENCE WITH YOUR EYES CLOSED FOR A FEW MINUTES.

14. CENTERING PRAYER IS DIFFERENT FROM MEDITATION IN THAT MEDITATION IS AN



ACTIVE FORM OF PRAYER WHEREAS  
CENTERING PRAYER IS A PASSIVE,  
RECEPTIVE PRAYER. (SOUND BYTE)

15. REFERENCED IN QUESTION 10.

16. THOSE PARTICIPATING IN CENTERING  
PRAYER SHOULD DO SO ON A REGULAR  
BASIS. MANY GROW TIRED AND  
DISCOURAGED WHEN THEY ARE NOT ABLE  
TO DISCERN A POSITIVE CHANGE IN THEIR  
LIVES. WHEN THEY ENCOUNTER DARKNESS  
AND ARE NOT GETTING A MEASURE OF  
SATISFACTION, IT CAN BE DIFFICULT FOR  
THEM TO PERSEVERE. THESE REACTIONS  
ARE QUITE NORMAL. A MENTOR, SUPPORT  
GROUP OR SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR SHOULD BE  
AVAILABLE TO PROVIDE GUIDANCE WHEN  
NEEDED. (SOUND BYTE)

17A. POPE PAUL VI SAID TO A GROUP OF TRAPPIST  
MONKS... "THE CHURCH WILL NEVER REVIVE  
UNTIL IT RECOVERS ITS CONTEMPLATIVE  
TRADITION."

17B. POPE JOHN PAUL II... "IN VIEW OF THE GREAT  
DIFFICULTIES OF THE WORLD, IT IS  
NECESSARY TO RECOGNIZE THAT THE

CHURCH HAS MORE NEED OF SOULS  
DEDICATED TO CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER.  
CONTEMPLATION IS THE SOURCE OF ACTION.  
FROM IT IS DERIVED THE SPIRITUAL FORCES  
WHICH SUSTAINS GODS' PEOPLE."

### 3.2.3 Interviewee Questions

1.
  - a. What does the phrase Contemplative Dimension of Spirituality mean to you?
  - b. Do you think the Contemplative dimension of spirituality has been restored/renewed in today's society? If so, please cite examples.
2. What does the term Spiritual Value mean to you?
3. Why is contemplation considered the deepest kind of prayer?
4. What is contemplative prayer and what is its purpose?
5. Why do you think contemplative prayer is of value to lay people?
6. How does God help one's intuition grow through contemplative prayer?

7. Are there outward signs that a person has reached a contemplative level of prayer?
8. Is there a scriptural basis for contemplative prayer?
9. How beneficial is contemplative prayer to a person in crisis?
10. How do you account for the increased interest in contemplative prayer today?
11. What has occurred in society today that has made contemplative prayer so desirable to lay people?
12. Why do you think contemplative prayer has been kept under a "bushel basket" with the Catholic religion, especially when so many people are seeking spiritual nourishment?
13.
  - a. Will you define the difference between contemplative prayer and centering prayer?
  - b. Describe the procedure/ method of centering prayer.
14. How is centering prayer different from meditation?
15. Is it possible to experience the power of God while centering?

16. We know that people who are addictive and compulsive exist in society. How can centering prayer help them?
17. What are some of the problems that arise by participating in meditation and prayer?
18. Why do you think Pope John Paul II asked that the contemplative tradition be brought to the attention of lay people?
19. Is centering prayer essential for a Christian's salvation?

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

As indicated in the introduction of this paper, this project began as a documentary video for use by the St. Louis Contemplative Outreach Organization. Despite their decision to not participate in this project, the goal of producing an interesting and informative video documentary on the subject remained. Thus, a search for other groups or individuals in the vicinity of St. Louis who practiced contemplative prayer was undertaken.

##### **4.1 Challenge**

This project has provided a challenge for the fifteen months that has been required to convert my vision for this endeavor into the desired documentary. It has been extremely time consuming, with many details that tested my patience, but at the same time I learned much about both

the subject matter and about the process of creating a complex video documentary.

Initially, it was necessary to develop a basis of understanding by reviewing available literature and consulting with local experts, i.e., religious and lay leaders of groups that practiced a contemplative lifestyle. The information obtained provided the framework for the questions used during the several months of the interviewing stage and the questions in turn provided the broad outline for the script.

Through a series of referrals, interviews were obtained with twenty four persons for use in this video. However, prior to each interview, a signed release form granting me permission to use, in whole or in part, their name, picture, video image, or voice in the documentary was obtained.

#### 4.2 Interviews

Each interview lasted from one to three hours and proved to be very informative and fascinating. The acquisition of such a large quantity of material presented both opportunities and problems. The material served as a broad base of video and audio that provided me with many sound bites for use in the documentary, but it represented a massive effort to review the material and established a situation in which material from some interviews might not be used.

The interviews were reviewed to determine which segments were to be used and the length of the segments. This was a very important, although tedious, process that served two main purposes. First it enhanced my knowledge of the subject matter and second it identified the bulk of the footage to be used.

#### 4.3 Script

Although the development of the questions provided a broad outline of the script, it was necessary to review the answers from the interviews and select those, which when woven together, gave a cohesive answer to the questions. The script was further expanded by using the basic questions to write the transitional commentary between the answers provided by the sound bites. This commentary was based on the literature search and information obtained from the experts that were consulted. A priest, a pastoral minister and lay person who practice the contemplative lifestyle on a daily basis were kind enough to review the script to assure its accuracy and appropriateness.

After the introduction and commentary sections were written, I recorded them, using my voice, on video tape for later use in the editing phase of the project. During the previous two years, I have been under the direct supervision of Mrs. Elizabeth Dixon, owner of Alfred Dixon Speech

Systems, Inc., 80 Madison Avenue, New York, NY. Mrs. Dixon coached me during the taping of the voice-over material for the documentary.

Then a search for pictures, B-roll, and sound effects that would match the tone and sense of the overall production began. The plan to attempt to characterize the "tone and sense" of the production was necessary because of the abstract nature of the subject matter. Therefore a combination of action and still images that evoked a sense of the natural and spiritual worlds were combined with the commentary to provide the transitions between the various video/ audio bites selected from the interviews. Some scenes came from file footage that was personally shot in downtown St. Louis, St. Louis County and St. Charles County. Other file footage had been previously obtained during a personal trip to Europe and additional B-roll was obtained courtesy of Neff Productions, Inc. Photographs provided by two close friends, as well as personal photographs were converted to video footage for potential inclusion in the documentary.

#### 4.4 Editing

The editing phase began with laying an audio track consisting of the introductory material and then matching photographs and video with the voice-over. This is a tedious, time consuming and very lengthy process. The video had to be matched up exactly with the audio and the visual

scenes had to be joined without "glitches." I learned that the control track method of editing can be very accurate, but in order to achieve this accuracy an individual scene may have to be adjusted by a frame in one direction or the other. The time consumed in this process could have been noticeably reduced if all equipment used during the production had time code capabilities. It should be pointed out that the video shot with my personal camera used SVHS format, but no time code capability was available.

The editing sequence continued by adding the video/ audio bites from the interviews after the introduction and each transitional commentary. The physical editing was done in an insert mode rather than an assemble mode. A more precise cut on the timing of both audio and video segments was achieved using this technique. As a final step, the music was selected to match the mood of the documentary and was mixed with the commentary and sound bite audio. The entire process was more time consuming than first envisioned due to the number of interviews and lengthy questions and the complexities of this art form.

Permission was granted to use the editing room on weekends during normally closed hours to complete the final editing phase. This eliminated some of the problems encountered in scheduling during the initial editing



phases. Sharing the editing room equipment with other students posed some problems because the adjustments they made frequently did not meet the needs of my project. Equipment that was available five years ago for my basic video course had been replaced by different models which force additional training time. It also made it difficult to quickly determine what settings had been changed, and for the first two months, most manuals were not available in the control room for reference.

Another problem that caused some frustration was that each of the three color monitors looked different even when the same color bar signal was applied. Uncertainty as to which colors had really transferred to the master edit tape forced some reedits after observing the master edit on a monitor at another location. Even though the control room monitors were checked prior to each editing session, there were no manuals available to provide instructions for adjusting them. My husband helped me immensely with the editing of the documentary. He was a valuable resource and contributed to the success of the video.

#### 4.5 Guidance for Future Projects

If I had an opportunity to produce this documentary again, I would first apply for a grant so I could take a leave of absence from work. I would then be able to dedicate my full attention to the project.

I would revise the script so that there would be fewer questions for each interviewee and I would selectively reduce the number of interviews. I would also attempt to obtain interviews with experts who have national reputations on this subject, such as Fathers Thomas Keating, Basil Pennington, and William Menninger.

I encountered technical problems with both lighting and some audio during this project. If I were enabled to produce this video again, I would need to obtain better lighting and audio capabilities. The locations that were available for some of the interviews did not provide the quality of lighting that my equipment needed and I did not have supplemental lighting available. Also, I was not able to eliminate the background noise at any of the locations. It would have been preferable to either tape the interviews in a studio setting or to use video scenes that did not require a tight synchronization of video and audio so that an audio interview in a controlled setting could be obtained separately from the video scenes.

#### 4.6 Clients

Although my original client was the St. Louis Contemplative Outreach Organization, I consider my new clients to be the interviewees who consented to participate in this worthy project. These people appreciated being part of this project and felt it was well worth their time

and effort. All of them have a keen knowledge of their intimate relationship with God and their relationship is real and quite meaningful to them. Several of them commented that this project would likely be very difficult to produce and that it was a pure gift of God when it was completed. All of them requested a final copy of the documentary to share with others.

Several of the interviewees thought it was unusual that I was pursuing a degree in Corporate and Industrial Communications but that I was doing my thesis on a religious subject such as contemplative prayer. I explained that I became interested in the subject on a personal basis and believe that it is a subject that should be introduced, and can be of benefit to many people. The techniques that I learned and used in producing this documentary are useful in both the secular and religious worlds.

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